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## MARXISM AS ANTI-PHILOSOPHY: AN INTERVIEW WITH DARIO CANKOVIC

LEXICON,  
PHILOFICTION

ANTI-PHILOSOPHY, HISTORICAL MATERIALISM, MARX, MARXISM, NON-LARUELLE, NON-PHILOSOPHY

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C. Derick Varn: The way “dialectics” relates to historical materialism has been problematic for Marxists for a while. If one is not careful, the relation between “ideas and material” is perfectly circular; if one reads historical materialism as a “dialectical opposition” it leads to ontological contradiction and a special pleading for either ideas or material. What do you see as the way out of this problem?

**Dario Cankovic:** The standard interpretation of Marx, at least among Hegelian Marxists, regards *dialectical materialism* as the philosophical foundation of Marx’s project. Dialectical materialism is understood as Hegelian dialectics (the “rational kernel” which Marx is said to have extracted from Hegel) with a materialist point of departure (Hegel “upside-down” or Feuerbach). *Historical materialism* is understood as “the materialist conception of history,” a methodological approach to the study of history and society which is a product of the application of *dialectical materialism* to these subjects. Marx is, in some sense, taken to have synthesized Hegelian *dialectics* with Feuerbachian *materialism* to produce *dialectical materialism*: a Hegelian method with a Feuerbachian point of departure.

I think this (mis)understanding of Marx as Hegelian with a Feuerbachian point of departure is what is responsible for, as you put it, a reading of historical materialism as a “dialectical opposition” — between the material and the ideational, material base and ideological superstructure, matter and mind — which leads to an ontological contradiction (or, as I would prefer to put it, an ontological *antinomy*) and consequently a special pleading for the ontological and explanatory priority of either matter or mind. Hegelian Marxists have not been able to overcome this “contradiction,” this antinomy, between the material and the ideational precisely because Hegel’s dialectic demands the establishment of these distinct contradictory ontological categories — because Hegel’s dialectic just *is* the logic of interaction between (the dynamics of) these contradictory categories. Hence the constant

back-and-forth debates and oscillation within Marxism between Hegelian *obscurantist idealism* ("historical idealism") which prioritizes the ideational, and positivistic *vulgar materialism* ("ahistorical materialism") which prioritizes the material. Dialectics and materialism understood in this Hegelian and Feuerbachian way don't mix. They're like oil and water. Hegel's dialectics is essentially idealistic and can't just be transposed from ideas to matter while keeping its form intact. Dialectical materialism understood in this way is an attempt to square the circle — it is a contradiction in terms: it is *idealist materialism* or *materialist idealism*. It is nonsense.

Marx, to his credit, is a far more subtle and advanced thinker than many of his self-proclaimed disciples. Hegelian Marxists (which to me makes about as much sense as Heideggerian Marxists! though I'm sure they exist; academics, in their constant quest for attention, have tried to alchemically synthesize the strangest admixtures) read Marx just as yet another pupil of "the Master," Hegel, rather than as a profoundly important philosopher (or, rather, anti-philosopher) in his own right who makes a radical break not just with Hegel, but with philosophy.

As Marx himself says of his *method*, in an often quoted passage by Hegelian Marxists which attempts to prove their point but curiously proves the opposite (which sounds weirdly Hegelian): "my method of development is not Hegelian, since I am a materialist and Hegel is an idealist." Marx understands, and as Hegelians can't seem to understand, you can't just transpose Hegelian dialectics to matter. Marx emphasized that his "method of development" isn't Hegelian *since* he (Marx) is a materialist and Hegel is an idealist. The "rational kernel," which Hegelians go on-and-on about, which Marx extracts from Hegel after stripping away the "mystical form," is far smaller than Hegelians assume.

Hegel was, I suppose, a proto-systems thinker. If there is a "rational kernel" to Hegel I suppose it is that. Just as Kant tried to work out the implications of Newtonian mechanics for philosophy, Hegel tries to do the same with Newtonian dynamics. Insofar as both Kant and Hegel were pre-Darwinian thinkers, their understanding of history, insofar as they had one, was overly deterministic, like the Newtonian system itself. There is a certain inevitability to the course of history in Hegelian terms — we cannot perhaps grasp the dynamics of history while we are part of it, we're just along for the ride, and can theorize about those dynamics after the fact. It is Darwin and his theory of evolution through natural selection that, for the first time, permits for an *evolutionary dynamical* understanding of history and society. In a sense, what Marx inherits from Hegel is a terminology which he uses to express distinctly Darwinian concepts. Given that most Hegelian Marxists are housed in humanities departments and have little to no acquaintance with science, past or present, this is completely lost on them. They cannot help but read Marx as a Hegelian because they themselves are pre-Darwinian, perhaps even pre-Newtonian, thinkers. Either because they are unfamiliar with the works of these great scientists (a liberal arts education, for all its pretenses of breadth, is surpassingly narrow) or because they haven't assimilated the philosophical implications of these scientific developments.

Engels here, though not nearly as subtle or advanced a thinker as Marx, is eons ahead of Hegelian Marxists. In another often cited passage of scripture (which is how Hegelian Marxists seem to treat Marx and Engels!), Engels says: "The relation of Hegelian dialectics to rational dialectics is the same as that of the caloric theory to the mechanical theory of heat and that of the phlogistic theory to the theory of Lavoisier." Now, for readers who might not be familiar with these disputes, Hegelian Marxists cite this passage as proof that Marx was a Hegelian, that "Marxist dialectic differs from Hegelian dialectic only in its point of departure; the form is otherwise identical." This shows not only an astounding ignorance of science, but makes me question the functional literacy of these people. I don't know how we can go from Engels' description of the relation of Hegelianism to Marxism as that of between a *false* scientific theory (and I'm being generous here, I don't think there was anything scientific about Hegel) to a *new* scientific theory as proof that Marx was a Hegelian at heart. I doubt Hegelians even know what these theories are, let alone the relations between them.

Perhaps we would have been better off if Marx didn't come from an intellectual climate dominated by Hegel, as a professor of mine once remarked. Though I do think that Hegel had one positive influence on Marx. Insofar as Hegel, and German Idealism in general, was a reaction to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, it served the function of transmitting Kant to Marx in a way that wouldn't have happened if Marx was, say, a British thinker, rather than a German intellectual. The British Isles were decidedly less advanced philosophically even if they produced the era's greatest scientists. In some sense the intellectual underdevelopment of Germany allowed German intellectuals to assimilate the implications of British scientific developments in a way that the British couldn't. Kant effects a Copernican revolution in philosophy, and Marx is a product of this revolution.

But Marx isn't just working in the wake of Kant, and to a lesser extent of Hegel, but effects his own (anti)philosophical revolution. It is this (anti)philosophical revolution that we have to understand if we want to understand how to overcome the "contradiction," the *antinomy*, between mind and matter.

*Historical materialism* is not just a byproduct of *dialectical materialism*. Historical materialism is *Marx's method*. Where "historical materialism" is to be understood is not just as a *materialist understanding of history*, but also as a *historical understanding of matter*.

I credit this important insight to an overlooked 20th-century Wittgensteinian and Marxist philosopher, Guy Robinson. I recommend his books, *Philosophy and Mystification* and *Philosophy and Demystification*, to philosophers and Marxists alike. (The full manuscripts of the latter were only made available posthumously by Guy's son, and are hosted by Rosa Litchenstein on her site "Anti-dialectics"; I would also recommend Rosa's site to anyone interested in a scholarly engagement with "dialectical

materialism"; while I'm far less rabidly anti-Hegelian than Rosa, after a few interactions with Hegelians I can understand her allergy to "dialectics").

History and matter are interrelated/internally related, i.e., they are each partially constitutive of the meaning of the other and cannot be defined independently. The locution "historical materialism" would at first suggest that there are a total of four viable philosophical positions: (1) ahistorical idealism, (2) ahistorical materialism, (3) historical idealism and (4) historical materialism. But if history and matter are interrelated two of these positions are impossible. Namely, neither ahistorical materialism nor historical idealism are viable options. Both reduce to ahistorical idealism because they elevate either the *material* or the *ideational*, either *matter* or *history*, to the status of a transhistorical/transcendental category. But if history cannot be understood other than materially, nor matter other than historically, then we are left with the choice between only ahistorical idealism and historical materialism. *Vulgar materialism* and *obscurantist idealism* are just *ahistorical idealism* disguised as *historical materialism*.

This understanding of historical materialism opens the door to overcoming the antinomy between mind and matter, subject and object, not because — as the Hegelians would have it — it offers us a dialectical/dynamical understanding of the interactions between two distinct domains, or because it brings the two categories together in some new contradictory synthesis. Rather because it destroys the two previous categories — mind and matter — and creates a new category of *matter*, a historical dynamic understanding of matter in contrast to the previous ahistorical transcendental understanding thereof. This is not a synthesis of the previous two categories, but their destruction and the creation of something entirely new.

*Matter* itself has a history, and is both an abstract category created by our theorizing of nature, as well as a relation between humans and nature. *Matter* is, for every generation, that which it can shape; that which has, and can be given, form.

Scientific progress continuously revolutionizes our understanding of matter. Science is an iterative process, which not only advances our theoretical understanding, but also our practical capacities to shape nature. The technologies it produces themselves expand our capacities, and in doing so, create new phenomena for scientific theorizing. *Matter*, far from being this dead transcendental category, is a living product of humanity's interaction with nature.

Marx is not a dualist as both the Hegelian and positivistic understandings of him would suggest. Mind and matter aren't distinct ontological categories. There is only matter, but not the dead matter of the vulgar materialist. Rather humanity and nature, both concretely and abstractly, are produced by and reproduced through a constant dynamical interaction with one another. Historical materialism is, I suppose, a sort of "naturalism" (though this term too carries with it far too much philosophical and ideological baggage to be useful at describing Marx's radical insight). Historical materialism breaks down the distinctions between mind and matter, between humanity and nature, erected by all previously existing philosophy.

In doing so it opens the door to the possibility to transcend philosophy, which is dependent upon these distinctions, and to construct a unified self-conscious science in the service of socialism, in the service of general human emancipation.

Marx, in a sense, brought the Kantian Copernican revolution in philosophy to a close, but not by making philosophy scientific (as Kant sought to do), but by doing away with philosophy entirely thereby making room for a science free from philosophy, free from metaphysics. As Hillary Putnam is said to have said: "I don't mind pre-Kantian speculative philosophy, as long as it was done before Kant." I would amend that to: I don't mind Kantian transcendental philosophy, as long as it was done before Marx.

Hegelian Marxists, insofar as they envision the relation between Hegel and Marx as that of master and pupil, haven't been able to see the profoundly anti-philosophical implications of Marx's thought. Marx is always seen as working in the shadow of Hegel. In fact, I don't think Marx himself was clear on just how radical his ideas were. Or, even if he was, he doesn't carry those ideas to their conclusion. Largely because, as John Higgins puts it in his review of Norman Levine's *Marx's Discourse with Hegel*, Marx was always more than just a philosopher or social scientist. "He was a journalist, a political activist, and a compulsive polemicist as well as an insatiably curious and relentless researcher, one of the greatest public intellectuals of his period." If he didn't carry out his anti-philosophical project to its completion to make way for scientific socialism it was because he had other more important political work to do. The task of building scientific socialism — on the methodological foundation of historical materialism, as part of an effort to understand and change the world — falls on us today, the heirs of Marx.

**C.DV.:** What are you defining as Marx's "anti-philosophy?" There are many different things implied by that term: anti-philosophy for Badiou is different than the category used by Boris Groys and both are different from Francois Laruelle's non-philosophy.

**D.C.:** I will not comment on Badiou, Groys or Laruelle directly, as I'm not familiar enough with their work. I'll try to give an exposition of what I take to be Marx's anti-philosophy, or rather, why I take Marx to be an anti-philosopher. I prefer the latter expression insofar as the former suggests that he is just another philosopher with a rival theory. I will just briefly say, from what I do know of Laruelle, he does consider Marxism and psychoanalysis as candidates for non-philosophy, and insofar as he thinks there is a need for a non-philosophical understanding of philosophy because philosophy cannot understanding itself philosophically, I think there are some parallels to Marx.

Before getting to anti-philosophy, it would be useful to say a few words about philosophy. Philosophy, at least in the Western tradition (and this includes Islamic philosophy which is a direct continuation of the tradition of Late Classical-era philosophy),

goes through two-phases. The first metaphysical pre-Kantian phase of philosophy conceives of its activity as investigation of the mind-independent necessary metaphysical structure of the world. The second transcendental Kantian phase conceives of its activity as investigation of the mind-constitutive world-constituting necessary transcendental structure or structuring principles of thought itself. While Kant's Copernican revolution is certainly a revolution in philosophy, insofar as in trying to render philosophy scientific it radically changes the way philosophy is done, it doesn't represent a complete break with philosophy. Philosophy remains an effort to understand the world and ourselves *a priori*. Furthermore, both conceive of the objects of their investigation, whether metaphysical or transcendental, as necessary and immutable, as *ahistorical* or *transhistorical*, without or outside of history.

Self-conceptions of philosophers aside, philosophy is not a transhistorical category, it is a human activity and a body of theories *with a history*. It is conceptual investigation and invention born out of a fascination with and misunderstanding of necessity. It is decidedly pre-scientific in that it is an attempt to understanding nature, ourselves and our place in it through the lens of language, though not self-consciously so. This fascination and misunderstanding is a consequence of our alienation from our collective agency. While humanity shapes and is shaped by nature and our concepts, this collective capacity doesn't extend to individual human beings. We create concepts in an never-ending exchange with nature, but you and I as individual human beings are inducted into a community of language-users of an already formed language and brought forth into an already reformed world. We — collectively and individually — we are ignorant of our own history. Moreover, individually we do not have the same capacities that we do collectively. Humanity creates concepts through its struggle to survive and reforge nature. Individual human beings do not have the same capacities to create concepts or reforge nature. We are not conscious of the dynamics of our metabolic exchange with nature.

To paraphrase what Marx says in the preface to *The German Ideology*: "We have constantly made up for ourselves false conceptions about ourselves, about what we are and what we ought to be. We have arranged our relationships according to our ideas. The phantoms of our brains have gotten out of our hands. We, the creators, have bowed down before our creation. Let us liberate ourselves from the chimeras, the ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which we are pining away." This liberation, of course, cannot happen just by changing ideas, if you want to change our ideas you have to change the world.

This brings us to an important insight of *historical materialism*, one which puts an end to philosophy as conceived above. Namely, paraphrasing what Marx says in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: "It is not our consciousness that determines our existence, but our social existence that determines our consciousness." Because historical materialism provides the methodological foundations for a scientific investigation and understanding of society, including of philosophy, it allows us to understand the phenomenon of philosophy better than the philosophers themselves. As Marx puts it, once again in *The German Ideology*: "The philosophers have only to dissolve their language into the ordinary language, from which it is abstracted, in order to recognize it, as the distorted language of the actual world, and to realize that neither thoughts nor language in themselves form a realm of their own, that they are only *manifestations* of actual life."

Historical materialism not only overcomes the conceptual confusions wrought by all previous philosophies — which were just various permutations of *ahistorical idealism* — but it also explains why those philosophers fell into those confusions in the first place. It kills philosophy; philosophy is dead. Dead not in the sense that there aren't people who practice it or believe in it, but rather it is dead in the same way astrology or theology are. It is dead as a viable intellectual option. It has been superseded by science. It lingers because the sort of self-conscious science made possible by historical materialism has yet to be constituted.

Philosophers today, metaphysicians and transcendentalists alike, are zombies (who, in questioning whether other active living people lack consciousness, demonstrate their own lack of intelligence) or ghosts who haven't realized that they're dead. They haunt the halls of the academy occasionally infecting the minds of unsuspecting youths. There are still some survivors in the academy, to be sure, cohabiting those tombs with the undead, but those are mostly historians of philosophy and people working on history and philosophy of science. The latter, at its best, isn't really "philosophy," and I mean that as a compliment.

While historical materialism brings an end to philosophy, it points the way forward toward a scientific investigation and invention of concepts. Whereas philosophy was a product of and reproduced our alienation from our collective agency, insofar as historical materialism makes us conscious of our collective agency it opens, for the first time in history, the possibility of understanding the interrelation between humanity and nature, and all the myriads of social phenomenon created through this interaction.

**C.DV.:** What do you see as the metaphysical commitments of historical materialism since materialism is itself is a metaphysical stance?

**D.C.:** None. Historical materialism eschews all metaphysics. But, of course, much hinges here on what we mean by "metaphysics."

Historical materialism has no metaphysical or transcendental commitments insofar as "metaphysical" here is understood as a commitment to the existence of mind-independent necessary structures, and "transcendental" as mind-constitutive world-constituting necessary structures or structuring principles.

The history of philosophy can partly be understood as a history of humanity trying to grapple with the concepts and categories it created to deal with the world, but which it has misunderstood as being imposed on it by the world. We, the creators, have bowed

down before our creations, our concepts and categories, and have taken them to have an existence independent of us.

Metaphysicians treat our concepts as *objects* (in fact, Plato, the arch-metaphysician in some sense, goes so far as to deny reality to actual objects and treats concepts — the Forms — as the only real objects, of which everything else is a pale reflection of). They task philosophy with coming up with correct *theories* about or *descriptions* of this sempiternal conceptual realm. Metaphysicians illicitly extend the logic of particulars to universals, of the concrete to the abstract. The perennial philosophical debates — between various brands of *realism* and *anti-realism* — which we have inherited from Classical philosophy, which persist to this day, are a consequence of this metaphysical view of concepts-as-objects. For some given concept or category, realists affirm and anti-realists deny the existence of an *abstract object* (a philosophical confusion, if there ever was one) or *structure* corresponding to this concept or category. Neither of them denies the concept or category in its linguistic form, but, insofar as both have a *representationalist* view of language — regarding the sole or primary function of language to be *description* — they squabble over whether this linguistic concept or category corresponds to anything in the world, whether it is right or wrong, correct or incorrect, true or false.

Transcendentalists are not so primitive. If there ever was progress in philosophy, Kant's Copernican revolution is surely an instance of it. I take the fundamental Kantian shift to be from treating concepts and categories as *objects* to treating them as *rules*. Kant's transcendental method ushers in this change in view because it ceases to look at the abstract on the model of the concrete, and instead tries to understand the necessary preconditions for the possibility of something — experience, cognition, communication, language, etc. The necessity of certain concepts and categories is no longer the adamant necessity of an abstract object, that of an unchangeable, unshapable *thing*. Rather it is the necessity of a *constitutive rule*. We *must* accept certain concepts and categories, certain *rules* and *laws*, not because we are forced by some quasi-gravitational force by Plato's Forms, nor because we would be incorrect if we didn't, but rather because these rules are partially constitutive of certain activities, they are partially constitutive of thought itself. E.g., if you want to think *correctly* you have to think *logically*, according to the rules of (some) logic, *because* those rules *define* "thinking correctly"; thinking correctly just is *thinking according to these rules*. Interestingly, I think these insights are better developed by Wittgenstein than by Kant, largely because Wittgenstein was working in the wake of Frege's development of formal logic, consequently it was easier for Wittgenstein than Kant to explicitly regard concepts-as-rules.

Historical materialism, working in the wake of transcendentalism, builds upon this transcendentalist insight of concepts-as-rules. While the fundamental insights necessary for the development of historical materialism are in Marx, I don't think Marxists have a monopoly to historical materialism, nor do I think that they have always, perhaps not even often, been its most consistent proponents. Many other philosophers outside the Marxist philosophical and political tradition (which are interwoven) had the benefit of working in the wake of both Kant and Marx. Or at least in the wake of both Newton and Darwin — who, respectively, inspired Kant and Marx — and hence had the opportunity to try and independently work out the philosophical implications of these scientific developments. A fundamental insight shared by Marx, some American pragmatists, the left-wing of the Vienna Circle, and the latter Wittgenstein (all latter three are directly or indirectly influenced by Marx) is expressed in the Eight theses on Fauerbach: "All social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice." Concepts can fruitfully be viewed as rules, but this is still an impoverished partial picture of our concepts and categories. With respect to concepts, historical materialism goes beyond transcendentalism and understands our concepts and categories as tools, albeit abstract tools. Our concepts and categories, the distinctions that we decide to draw and enshrine in language, are a product of humanities long historical interaction with nature, and our practical day-to-day struggles to survive in and reshape the world. Both metaphysics and transcendentalism make a mystery out of our concepts, because on both accounts of concepts-as-objects and concepts-as-rules our concepts appear to us to be completely arbitrary. We cannot explain why we have the concepts that we do. It is only via a historical materialist understanding of concepts-as-tools that we can begin to try and understand the historical development of our concepts and categories as part of humanities continuous interaction with nature.

While I do think there have been non-Marxist philosophers who have been more consistent proponents of historical materialism than many Marxists — who tend to oscillate between vulgar materialism and obscurantist idealism draped in Marxist lingo — where I think Marx hasn't been surpassed is in his other fundamental historical materialist insight. Namely, as Marx says in that over-quoted passage in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, "The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness." Or, as Marx puts it, if you'll permit me to quote in full what I take to be a very important passage, *The German Ideology*:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. — real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology

men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.

In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life. In the first method of approach the starting-point is consciousness taken as the living individual; in the second method, which conforms to real life, it is the real living individuals themselves, and consciousness is considered solely as their consciousness.

This method of approach is not devoid of premises. It starts out from the real premises and does not abandon them for a moment. Its premises are men, not in any fantastic isolation and rigidity, but in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions. As soon as this active life-process is described, history ceases to be a collection of dead facts as it is with the empiricists (themselves still abstract), or an imagined activity of imagined subjects, as with the idealists.

Where speculation ends – in real life – there real, positive science begins: the representation of the practical activity, of the practical process of development of men. Empty talk about consciousness ceases, and real knowledge has to take its place. When reality is depicted, philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of existence. At the best its place can only be taken by a summing-up of the most general results, abstractions which arise from the observation of the historical development of men. Viewed apart from real history, these abstractions have in themselves no value whatsoever. They can only serve to facilitate the arrangement of historical material, to indicate the sequence of its separate strata. But they by no means afford a recipe or schema, as does philosophy, for neatly trimming the epochs of history. On the contrary, our difficulties begin only when we set about the observation and the arrangement – the real depiction – of our historical material, whether of a past epoch or of the present. The removal of these difficulties is governed by premises which it is quite impossible to state here, but which only the study of the actual life-process and the activity of the individuals of each epoch will make evident. We shall select here some of these abstractions, which we use in contradistinction to the ideologists, and shall illustrate them by historical examples.

Even if other philosophers pay lip service to practice, Marx takes it seriously, and goes on to attempt to develop an account of how theory emerges out of our practice, the abstract emerges out of the concrete, language out of life, ideas out of matter.

Materialism and idealism are indeed metaphysical stances, but insofar as Marx overcomes the antinomy between the two and offers us a new historical understanding of matter, Marx overcomes metaphysics. He thus establishes the foundations for a scientific understanding of phenomena previously relegated to the domain of philosophy. Historical materialism is not a metaphysical but a methodological stance. It is the methodology of a science without metaphysics. This doesn't mean science without *a priori* or *analytic* elements, but rather it permits for a scientific understanding of the *a priori* and *analytic*.

Unlike philosophers who make pronouncements about what the world is or must be like from the armchair, historical materialists should recognize that there is no royal road to nor through science. If you want to know what the world is like there is no other way than through scientific investigation. I suppose if I were to try and answer what ontology should historical materialists accept, I would say that of the best sciences of the day. This doesn't mean blind submission to whatever scientists say. Science itself is a social activity and a product of bourgeois society. Insofar as historical materialist exposes ideological and material conditions which shape and distorts scientific investigation and findings, it makes a better science possible.

**C.DV:** Are you putting Marx in counter distinction to Engels who did have a commitment to dialectical oppositions in physics? The issue I have here is by looking at Engels and many other of the early Marxists writings on science, the dialectic is transcendently assumed. As such, the method itself either results in metaphysical implications, or are you implying that the earliest historical materialists did not understand Marx's scientific views?

**D.C.:** Indeed, I do think Marx and Engels part ways on this point. Insofar as many early Marxists follow Engels and accept an Engelsian dialectics of nature — which does have a metaphysical or transcendental status — early Marxists misunderstood Marx. Or, at least, they underestimate the radical import of historical materialism. They treat Marx as yet another philosopher who just happens to have stumbled onto the *right* theory, as opposed to all those previous philosophies which were *wrong*. In contrast, if I'm right about the radical import of historical materialism, it isn't just another new philosophy, but rather represents a radical break with philosophy itself because it overcomes the antinomies, the contradictions, between the concepts and categories —

subject and object, mind and matter, particular and universal, practical and theoretical, etc. — upon which all philosophical debates are based. Insofar as historical materialism allows us to scientifically investigate and explain our concepts and categories, how they emerge out of concrete conditions, the very activity of philosophizing, and how the social being of philosophers determines their consciousness, it renders philosophy obsolete. Philosophy stands to historical materialism as astrology does to astrophysics.

In fact, Marx himself might not have fully realized the implications of historical materialism. He was, after all, a prolific writer, activist, polemicist, political economist, philosopher, social scientist. Insofar as Marx himself had a tendency to jump from project to project and left unfinished even his *magnum opus*, *Capital*, we don't know where he was going or where his ideas will lead us. The task for present-day Marxists remains to finish Marx's projects: the methodological project of realizing "scientific socialism," that self-conscious science in the service of emancipation; the theoretical project of understanding the capitalist mode of production; and, lastly and more importantly, the practical political project of changing the world.

**C.DV.:** This is similar, on this point, to some analytical Marxists and anti-dialectical Marxists. Do you still see the dialectical form as important to the logic of Marxism?

**D.C.:** Like before, much here depends on what we mean by the term "dialectics." Insofar as "dialectics" has far too much pre-Hegelian and Hegelian baggage I'd rather dispense with it entirely. That being said, I suppose if you want to understand dialectics as dynamics, the study of motion, then not only is "the dialectical form" important to Marxism, it is essential to Marxism. Historical materialism provides the foundations for a scientific understanding of the dynamics of history.

Marxists didn't used to shy away from the natural and formal sciences of their day; we shouldn't shy away from them either. Contemporary Marxists have a lot to learn from the developments in dynamical systems theory if they want to understand capitalism, as capitalism is, after all, a complex dynamical system. Not only that, but if we aspire to abolish the anarchy of the market and replace it instead with rational planning we'd damn well better be familiar with information theory, mathematical optimization, systems engineering, operations research, and countless other fields. Science hasn't remained static, though the understanding of Marxists of it seems to have — which isn't surprising when many Marxist remnants are housed in humanities departments and have reduced Marxism to literary criticism. Scientific socialism demands taking science seriously. It shouldn't come as a surprise that while the bourgeoisie in the United States depoliticized the sciences — formal, natural and social — during the Cold War, they left the humanities largely unmolested. The bourgeoisie have proven themselves to have good class instincts. I suspect this is partly because the humanities are largely harmless. They can only interpret the world in various ways — they can't understand it, and consequently they can't change it.

**C.DV.:** How do Marxists avoid the technocratic liberalism that exists in most of the applied scientific work out there?

**D.C.:** Scientific socialism needn't just be socialism in the spirit of science, but also can be conceived of as science in the service of socialism. Environmental groups already fund their own studies to counter corporate propaganda. Socialists, if we got ourselves organized and managed to recreate a mass movement, could do similar things. We should be training scientists and recruiting scientific workers into our ranks. There has been an increasing proletarianization of the intellectual workforce. Socialists should capitalize on this. Scientists have historically been quite sympathetic to socialism, because socialism was once not just sympathetic to but a strong proponent of science. It can be so again.

Another way to avoid and combat this "technocratic liberalism" is by articulating the emancipatory potential of science and technology. Increases in productivity could increase leisure, but instead under capitalism they are put in the service of profits. Humanity is made to serve the technology that is creates, the physical capital, in the name of profit, instead of it serving humanity. The Internet, a potentially radically democratic tool is instead made to service capital. Its potential to render politics transparent and politicians accountable is instead turned around and used for massive surveillance by the state and the market in the name of, respectively, security and profits. Many, though by no means all, technologies developed by the bourgeoisie are "dual-use," so to speak. They are put in the service of profits and exploitation but could be turned to serve the people and emancipation.

Socialists today could stand to learn a thing or two not just from science but from *science fiction*. In an age where the technology that we have is beyond the wildest dreams of previous science fiction writers, most of who couldn't even imagine computers or a world-wide information network, socialists need to dream — to dream big, and to dream big publicly. Where *News from Nowhere* or *Looking Backward* were once sheer fantasy, today the sorts of utopias they envision are realizable and as such outdated, because they do not adequately represent the emancipatory potential of present and future technology.

I find it somewhat curious that at a moment in history where socialism would be easier to build than ever, at least objectively, many socialists can do nothing but look to the past and lick their wounds, rather than peer into the future toward that communist horizon. We need to stop weighing ourselves down by traditions of dead generations and instead draw our poetry from the future.

**C.DV.:** Anything you'd like to say in closing?

**D.C.:** Thanks you for the interview. It has helped me work through some of these ideas more fully, and I hope that it stimulates further desperately needed discussion on the subject of science and socialism. Insofar as a scientific spirit is antithetical to

sectarianism, putting science back into scientific socialism might go some way toward undoing the sectarianism and dogmatism that has plagued 20th-century socialism.

Taken from The North Star

Foto: Bernhard Weber

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